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ABSTRACT

Improving retention in adult literacy programs is of great concern for both instructors and administrators. A learner-centered program is a must for improving retention. In such a program, a support system for learners should be readily accessible. Instruction should be based on students' goals, and program staff should be available to help students as their goals change. In addition, the issue of retention should receive attention from all staff. Suggestions for implementing a learner-centered program that will improve student retention include the following: (1) work with students to build self-esteem by helping them set reasonable goals that can be reached in a short period of time; (2) build trust between instructor and student and help the student to conquer self-doubt through positive feedback; (3) build on support that includes immediate and extended families; (4) talk with students about their return to school and ask them about their previous experiences; (5) counsel students on education and career planning; and (6) create a learner-centered program which includes an early-alert counseling program. (KC)

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Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research To Practice

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Increasing Retention Through Student Success

By Kari Malitz and Sarah Nixon-Ponder

Improving retention in adult literacy programs is an area of great concern for both instructors and administrators. Yet exactly how this is achieved remains an actively debated topic - and even somewhat of a mystery. In gathering information on this subject, through discussions with people in the field, looking at research studies and examining past experiences, we have compiled not only examples for program implementation but also some philosophies that we believe need to be intact within literacy programs for retention to increase.

The purpose of this *Research to Practice* is to examine the problem of retention in adult literacy programs. We have adapted and expanded on ideas from Tracy-Mumford's Student Retention: Creating Student Success to provide tangible examples for implementation. As you will see when you consider these recommendations, a learner-centered program is a MUST for those interested in improving retention.

Program Implementations:

Work with students to build self-esteem by helping them set reasonable goals that can be reached in a short period of time by:

- Holding regularly-scheduled conferences with students to talk about goals, establish plans for achieving them, and update their progress.
- Helping students acquire useful coping techniques.
- Giving concrete proof of success by using a collection of students' work (i.e., a portfolio).
- Assisting students in becoming responsible for reaching their goals.

Build trust between instructor and student and help the student to conquer self-doubt through positive feedback by:

- Assisting students to overcome embarrassment about coming back to school.
- Giving productive and immediate feedback dealing with student learning.
- Teaching problem-solving skills to students through the use of cooperative learning teams.
- Devising a learner-centered classroom.
- Giving positive feedback, especially when student learning is sluggish.
- Immediately putting into practice what has been learned.

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Build on support that includes immediate and extended families by:

- Initiating non-academic activities for students, involving families and neighbors whenever possible.
- Assisting in car pools and child care.
- Formulating a student communication plan consisting of no-show and extreme absentee follow-up.

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Talk with students about their return to school and ask them about their previous experiences by:

- Talking about the positive and negative impressions they have about school, noting the negatives so that they will not be repeated.

Counsel students on education and career planning by:

- Helping them to learn about their options. Direct students to agencies/services to assist with non-academic needs (i.e., transportation, child care, employability skills, job placement, and health care).

Create a learner-centered program by:

- Utilizing student feedback to assess teacher approaches.
- Employing a student retention team to help emphasize the importance of retention.
- Enacting an early-alert counseling program to recognize potential problems before they occur in order to let students know that there are alternatives.
- Acknowledging student mastery, time devoted, and commitment through quarterly award ceremonies and newsletters.
- Providing truthful information when recruiting new students, so as not to create false expectations on the part of the students (i.e., "it will be hard work, but we can work together" instead of "come here, get a GED, and get a better job").

Conclusion:

We believe that attention to the following issues will assist in improving retention.

1) Literacy programs need to have a support system that is readily accessible.
2) Instruction should be based on students' goals.
3) Program staff should be available to reevaluate students' goals and make revisions as these goals change.
4) Instructors, staff, and administrators must be willing to confront the retention needs of all students.
5) The issue of student retention must be high on the list of priorities for the entire instructional and administrative staff.

Reference:

Tracy-Mumford, F. (1994, March). Student Retention: Creating Student Success (Monograph No. 2). Washington, DC: National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, Inc.

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